

« You » Reconstructing the Past: Paul Auster's *Winter Journal*

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Autobiographical writing has been an integral part of literary research for decades. Which innovations does contemporary life writing contribute to the process of narrating the past? This paper focuses on the impact of narratological characteristics on the reconstruction of memory and self in Paul Auster's *Winter Journal* (2012) – an innovative work of autobiographical fragments which deviates from traditional life writing in that it is written in the second person. Considering Philippe Lejeune's and Gérard Genette's thoughts on second-person autobiography, this paper examines how the narrative situation in *Winter Journal* shapes subjectivity and temporality. As both protagonist and observer, the narratee oscillates between a distanced state of (critical) self-reflection and intimacy. This paper argues that by « reliving » the past through a dynamic dialogue with the self *and* the simultaneously addressed reader, the appellative function and the predominant use of the present tense enable a telescopic encounter with the past.

1. Introduction

Paul Auster, born in 1947 in Newark, New Jersey, is one of the best-known writers of contemporary American literature. Mostly known for his fiction, such as *The New York Trilogy* (1987), Auster has also written various works of non-fiction, poetry, and literary essays. While he enjoys much praise for his genre-bending writing, literary critics predominantly focus on his fictional oeuvre. But how does Auster's experimental style translate into his autobiographical works? His non-fictional memoir *Winter Journal* from 2012 bears some specific innovations and shows how narrative perspective may shape the relation between past and present, and memory and self. In an interview, Auster classifies *Winter Journal* as a « book of autobiographical fragments »², in which the author neither provides a full account of his past nor a coherent narrative. The consistent use of the second person makes *Winter Journal* a unique piece of experimental autobiographical writing. It presents an innovative telescopic approximation of the past in the present

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² Paul AUSTER, « *Winter Journal*: Paul Auster in Conversation with Paul Holdengräber », online video clip, *New York Public Library*, NYPL, 01/10/2012, web, 01/10/2016.

and provides an intriguing examination of the author's life with regard to ageing, physicality, pain, pleasure, accidents, his mother's death and other memories which are more or less all related to his body or bodily reactions. The aim of this paper is thus twofold: Firstly, it will outline the marginalisation of the self through the second-person perspective, examining its role in creating a dialogue with the self as narratee and in repositioning the self as an observer of its own experiences. Secondly, it will discuss the appreciation of the text's appellative function and the engagement of the (implied) reader in this dynamic dialogue. This paper will show that *Winter Journal* creates an extended space for the observation of temporality through a productive interplay of distance and intimacy and, as the paper concludes, eventually shows how second-person narration may promote a re-negotiation of selfhood and memory and a re-invention of the subject.

2. Autobiography and Second-Person Narration

In Auster's autobiographical project *Winter Journal*, the identity of author, narrator, and protagonist is disrupted through the narrative situation. The innovative choice of writing a complete autobiographical text from a second-person perspective is highly unusual and has various effects on the perception and construction of subjectivity as well as the relation between past and present. Monika Fludernik has provided valuable insights into second-person narration in fiction. According to her, most research has neglected the combination of the referential function of the second person to the protagonist *and* the address function³. This paper will argue that the very combination of these two functions becomes apparent in Auster's *Winter Journal*. Both Gérard Genette and Philippe Lejeune address the issue of second-person narration in their theoretical works. They outline some essential characteristics which I will apply to *Winter Journal*. My goal is to show how a narrative perspective which is often considered *artificial* may in fact be *beneficial* for the reconstruction of the past. The most central thoughts on second-person narration in autobiography have been expressed by Philippe Lejeune, who states that the « use of this process proves [...] the copresence in enunciation of an 'I' (that has become implicit), of a 'you,' and a

³ Cf. Monika FLUDERNIK, « Second Person Fiction: Narrative *You* As Addressee And/Or Protagonist », in id. *Arbeiten aus der Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 18 (1993), pp. 217-247, p. 218.

'he' (hidden under the 'you'), all three referring to the same individual »⁴. The reference to the narratee thus differs in its explicitness depending on the pronoun but is directed towards *one* individual or self. According to Lejeune, second-person narration sometimes « appears somewhat fleetingly in the *speeches (discours)* that the narrator addresses to the person that he was, either to cheer him up if he's in a bad mood, or to lecture him or repudiate him »⁵. Apart from these functions, Lejeune emphasises the necessary differentiation between the addressing subject and the subject being addressed – which of course accounts both for the distance of the self and for the establishment of a dialogic situation⁶. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Gérard Genette summarises Lejeune's idea of second-person autobiography as follows: « [T]his type of autobioheterodiegetic narrative seems less intensely figural or fictive than its third-person version. But it is actually more complex, since it includes the narratee in its action: the character *is* the narratee, he *is not* the narrator, and again, we do not know where the author *pretends to be*, and of course we know or guess that he is everywhere »⁷. Interestingly, this ties in with Auster's intention to write a work of non-fiction, a (seemingly) truthful account of the past; as the second person seems less fictive than the third person, the narration appears to be more direct and unmediated.

These theoretical considerations shall now be related to the characteristics and effects of the narrative situation in Paul Auster's *Winter Journal*. The marginalisation of the self by establishing a dialogue with the self as narratee will be discussed first, while the reader's position as an addressee and the suggested exemplarity and universality of experience will be outlined in a second step.

⁴ Philippe LEJEUNE, « Autobiography in the Third Person », (pp. 31-52) in Paul J. EAKIN (ed.), *On Autobiography*, trans. by Katherine LEARY, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 34. [*Je est un autre*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1980].

⁵ Ph. LEJEUNE, « The Autobiographical Pact », (pp. 3-30) in Paul J. EAKIN (dir.), *On Autobiography*, translated by K. LEARY, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 7 (emphasis in the original). [*Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1975].

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ Gérard GENETTE, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. by Jane E. LEWIN, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990, p. 133 (emphasis in the original). [*Nouveau discours du récit*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1983].

3. Marginalisation of and Dialogue with the Self as Narratee

In *Winter Journal*, the subject is (at first sight) marginalised through the perspective which is not « I ». At the same time, however, the narrator engages in a dynamic dialogue with the past (and present) self. In an interview, Auster comments on his choice of the second person and claims that this perspective is « ideal because it conveys a certain intimacy and yet a certain kind of separation between writer and subject. [...] I am able to interrogate myself, address myself from that slight distance »⁸. This « slight distance » is thus said to be necessary to provoke an external perception, but at the same time encourages a narrowing effect of intimacy⁹. In *Winter Journal*, the second-person perspective resembles a form of interior dialogue Auster establishes by addressing the narratee as ‘you’, e.g. when he gives instructions or recommendations: « Perhaps it is just as well to put aside your stories for now and try to examine what it feels like to live inside this body from the first day you can remember being alive until this one. A catalogue of sensory data. What one might call a *phenomenology of breathing* »¹⁰. This passage can be understood as a request directed towards the narratee to enter the exploration of the past – an encouraging and inviting gesture on the part of the narrator.

In *Winter Journal*, the second-person perspective is therefore not concerned with a marginalisation of the self for its own sake, but for the sake of providing a space for *self-reflection*. With the necessary distance, the narrator can thus reconstruct the self as other by employing the second person in the process of remembering the past. Robert Folkenflik also recognises the « Self as Other » in a homonymous essay: He sees autobiography as a way to get « an image of our exterior self [...] that enables self-contemplation »¹¹. The distance established between the narrator and narratee makes possible a thorough introspection of the subject « from the outside ». Similarly, Auster positions the self as an observer of his past, which means that he is not only the writer but also a *receiver* of his stories (past and present). Auster’s following comment on one of his other autobiographical works, *The Invention of Solitude*, can also be transferred to *Winter Journal*: « If you’re too close to the thing you’re trying to write about, the perspective vanishes,

⁸ Paul AUSTER, « Paul Auster Interview », *Time Out London*, web, 01/10/2016.

⁹ Cf. M. FLUDERNIK, « Second Person Fiction: Narrative *You* As Addressee And/Or Protagonist », *op. cit.*, p. 239.

¹⁰ P. AUSTER, *Winter Journal*, London, Faber and Faber, 2013, p. 1 (emphasis in the original). [2012].

¹¹ Robert FOLKENFLIK, « The Self as Other », (pp. 215-234) in id., *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 215.

and you begin to smother. I had to objectify myself in order to explore my own subjectivity »¹². The distanced position of an observer thus enables Auster to objectify himself and engage in a dialogue with the (self as) other, creating both alienation and identification at the same time.

Furthermore, Robert Lehnert suggests that *Winter Journal* does not aim at a *narration* of the past but rather a reconstruction of the past and a possibility to *relive* memories¹³. The use of the present tense in most passages thereby intensifies the telescopic encounter with the past and reduces the distance between past and present events. Also, James Olney claims that memories are reconstructed « in full awareness that the temporal position [the life writer] occupies is the present moment of the past and that an excursion into history can begin only with a backward reading from that point »¹⁴. In *Winter Journal*, the point of departure is also staged as this present moment of the past: the appellation of the narratee establishes a bond between past events and the present and increases the writer's ability to relive the memories presented. According to Jens Brockmeier, life writing is about « giving form to the past in light of the present [while] the past inextricably mingles with the present »¹⁵. This mingling of past and present is best represented in the merge of present tense and past events. It reduces the distance between the memory and the narratee, as can be seen in the following passage: « You are ten years old, and the midsummer air is warm, oppressively warm, so humid and uncomfortable that even as you sit in the shade of the trees in the backyard, sweat is gathering on your forehead »¹⁶. The approximation through present tense and second person helps to « outwit » the elusiveness and instability of subjectivity and memory. However, *Winter Journal* cannot escape the symptomatic unreliability of memories, as is emphasised in the following passage: « Some memories are so strange to you, so unlikely, so outside the realm of the plausible, that you find it difficult to reconcile them with the fact that you are the person who experienced the events you are remembering »¹⁷. Brockmeier doubts that we are able to get an outer perspective of ourselves to observe the passage of time

¹² P. AUSTER, « An Interview with Paul Auster », (pp. 13-39) in James M. HUTCHISSON (dir.), *Conversations with Paul Auster*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2013, p. 35.

¹³ Cf. Robert LEHNERT, « Autobiography, Memoir and Beyond: Fiction and Non-Fiction in Philip Roth's *The Facts* and Paul Auster's *Winter Journal* », (pp. 757-796), *Anglia* 132.4 (2014), p. 785.

¹⁴ James OLNEY, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 344.

¹⁵ Jens BROCKMEIER, « Time », (pp. 876-877) in Margaretta JOLLY (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, London, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, p. 877.

¹⁶ P. AUSTER, *Winter Journal*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

but suggests that « we are always and at all times immersed in the unsettling dynamics of temporal change »¹⁸. However, one may argue that autobiographical writing may to some extent react to this dilemma and provide a space for the subject to *observe* temporal change, which may allow the subject to overcome the seemingly insurmountable distance between past and present.

In contrast, the second person allows for the recollection of memories of traumatic experience or memories the author is « not very fond of »; in this case, the distance may provide a space for self-reflection and may thus provide a space of *liberation*. This applies to the death of Auster's mother¹⁹, but also the car accident Auster's family had been involved in and which was based on the narratee's error of judgement²⁰: « You took a chance you shouldn't have taken, and that error of judgment continues to fill you with shame »²¹. As I have already suggested, the second-person perspective in this case enables the protagonist to *access* negative experiences with a certain distance – which is additionally emphasised by the fact that the passage is written in past tense. The dilemma of *reliving* the memory appears to be especially intriguing in the following passage, which refers to another traumatic experience: « One memory haunts you above all others, and on nights when you are unable to sleep, you find it difficult not to go back to it, to re-hash the events of that day and *relive* the shame you felt afterward, have continued to feel ever since »²². In combination with the present tense, the impact of this memory on the present self is emphasised, while the word « relive » draws the past into the present.

On the one hand, the narrator may appeal to the narratee to either avoid responsibility or, much more likely, to remind his self of the shame as a form of atonement, self-punishment or even self-justification. On the other hand, he is able to approach memories which may be uncomfortable or not easy to access. These experiences of guilt, shame, or embarrassment may be easier to thematise thanks to the distance between self and narratee, which is gained through the second-person perspective. In both cases, the dialogic conception becomes evident and serves as a means to establish a distance necessary to approach and re-negotiate the self.

¹⁸ J. BROCKMEIER, « Time », *op. cit.*, p. 876.

¹⁹ P. AUSTER, *Winter Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 170 (emphasis added).

4. The Reader as Addressee and Subject

In a letter to J. M. Coetzee, Auster writes: « I realize that I often respond to your remarks with stories about myself. Understand: I am not interested in myself. I am giving you *case studies*, stories about anyone »²³. Similarly, in the sequel to *Winter Journal*, *Report from the Interior*, Auster explains why he feels the need to write about himself: « Not because you find yourself a rare or exceptional object of study, but precisely because you don't, because you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone »²⁴. The exchangeability of the self in *Winter Journal* does not at all correspond to the literal understanding of self-life-writing and the emphasis of a unique individual, such as for instance in Rousseau's *Confessions*. However, this exchangeability obviously becomes exceedingly relevant in an autobiographical work written in the second person. The exemplarity and universality of experience thus correlates with a further function of the second person in *Winter Journal*: the appellation of the reader.

In his account on second-person autobiography, Lejeune also emphasises the two-dimensionality of the addressee: « [I]f I talk to myself while saying to myself 'you,' at the same time I display this unfolded enunciation to a third party, the eventual listener or reader. The latter takes part in a discourse intended for him, even if he himself is no longer addressed. Enunciation is dramatized; it can only be unfolded in this way because imaginary footlights guarantee its unity and its relationship to its ultimate addressee »²⁵. The reader is thus engaged in a dialogue intended both for him- or herself and for the actual narratee. In an interview, Auster argues that the second person « allows the reader to enter the book. [...] We're having the same experiences in different variations »²⁶. This possible identification of the reader with the protagonist's memories or experiences is also represented in the very first lines of *Winter Journal*: « You think it will never happen to you, that it cannot happen to you, that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else »²⁷. This statement hints at the universality of the narrated events, the exchangeability of experience. Despite his status as a prominent writer,

²³ P. AUSTER and John M. COETZEE, *Here and Now: Letters 2008-2011*, London, Vintage, 2014, p. 45 (emphasis added). [2013].

²⁴ P. AUSTER, *Report from the Interior*, London, Faber and Faber, 2013, p. 4.

²⁵ Ph. LEJEUNE, « Autobiography in the Third Person », *op. cit.*, p. 34.

²⁶ P. AUSTER, « *Winter Journal*: Paul Auster in Conversation with Paul Holdengräber », *op. cit.*

²⁷ P. AUSTER, *Winter Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

Auster thus universalises the events and people of the past and present, (which, by the way, also becomes evident as none of the protagonist's close friends or family members are actually *named* but referred to as e.g. « your wife »). The exemplariness of the experiences accounts for their perception as *shared experiences* and therefore *shared* subjectivity. Fludernik approaches this process from a relational take and describes the interplay of alienation and identification as follows: « Narrative *you* has as its distinguishing trait the closeness to generalizing *you* and the *you* of self-address, and for this reason its initial distancing effect – ‘Is this me, the reader? Or is this a character?’ – can develop into an increased empathy effect, with the figural *you* (particularly in present tense texts) achieving maximum identification on the reader's part »²⁸. Fludernik addresses the potential distancing or alienating effect the second person may have on readers, but clearly supports the possibility of identification on the part of the reader, especially in texts written in present tense. However, the assumption that the reader is drawn into the narrative and able to identify with the « *you* » is based on an *idealised* reader. As the actual reader's age, experiences, or habits may differ greatly from the respective text, one must not assume a homogeneous readership that empathises with the narrator or with the narrated experiences to the same extent.

The following passage will provide a few examples of how the reader may still participate in the narration and how identification, as far as this is possible, may be achieved on the part of the reader: « Yes, you drink too much and smoke too much, you have lost teeth without bothering to replace them, your diet does not conform to the precepts of contemporary nutritional wisdom, but if you shun most vegetables it is simply because you do not like them, and you find it difficult, if not impossible, to eat what you do not like »²⁹. Similarly, the narratee's or the reader's flaws are embedded in the following accusation: « No doubt you are a flawed and wounded person, a man who has carried a wound in him from the very beginning (why else would you have spent the whole of your adult life bleeding words onto a page?), and the benefits you derive from alcohol and tobacco serve as crutches to keep your crippled self upright and moving through the world »³⁰. When the narrator confronts the narratee with his bad habits, the double address function in both quotations becomes apparent. Slightly patronizing, the narrator draws the reader into this « lecture » about nutrition and health and thus makes the reader part of the subjectivity pre-

²⁸ M. FLUDERNIK, « Second Person Fiction: Narrative *You* As Addressee And/Or Protagonist », *op. cit.*, p. 227 (emphasis in the original).

²⁹ P. AUSTER, *Winter Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

sented. As already outlined, present tense in this autobiographical work provides a more immediate form of temporal universality and may also serve to engage the reader in the narration and the process of reconstructing memories: « You are ten years old, and the midsummer air is warm, oppressively warm, so humid and uncomfortable that even as you sit in the shade of the trees in the backyard, sweat is gathering on your forehead »³¹. This passage may enable the reader to identify with the narrative by creating the sense of a common experience (or by *luring* the reader into a common experience) which seems transferable to others. In contrast to this effect of proximity, the use of the second person may also have an alienating effect on the reader: « One month from today, you will be turning sixty-four »³². Here, the future tense may encourage the reader to compare the prediction presented in the text to the given variables (i.e. age) in his or her own life. Instead of achieving identification, the reader may thus be alienated from the narrative. In the two previous examples, both identification and alienation are possible reactions of the reader to the text. However, I would argue that the present tense and its almost meditative « setting-the-mood-tone » allows for an immersion into the experience.

In addition, the sexual experiences of the self³³ or the description of venereal diseases³⁴ in *Winter Journal* may also make the reader uncomfortable, or as Lehnert suggests, make the reader « feel like a voyeur intruding into something that is not addressed to him »³⁵. This contraposition of identification and alienation hence broadens the scope of the reader's active involvement in the narrative. Even in cases of negative or delimitative interaction with the narrated self the reader is offered manifold opportunities to relate or distance her- or himself from the narrated experience. Stressing that what is narrated in *Winter Journal* is exemplary and includes experiences which « all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else »³⁶, the author more explicitly engages both the narratee as protagonist and the narratee as reader in the autobiographical recollection of the past.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³³ Cf. e.g. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

³⁵ R. LEHNERT, « Autobiography, Memoir and Beyond: Fiction and Non-Fiction in Philip Roth's *The Facts* and Paul Auster's *Winter Journal* », *op. cit.*, p. 786.

³⁶ P. AUSTER, *Winter Journal*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

5. Conclusion

This insight into Paul Auster's *Winter Journal* has shown that the narrative characteristics, or maybe even peculiarities, of second-person autobiography challenge the relation between narrator and narratee and promote a profound renegotiation of selfhood and memory. The supposed artificiality of the second person may in fact enable the author to enter a dialogue with the self in autobiographical writing and to provide an additional platform for the reader to approach another individual's memories as universalised experience. The appellative function of the second-person pronoun thus negotiates the selves of the protagonist *and* the reader and engages them in a productive relationship which constitutes the very exemplarity of lives.

The paper has argued that the extended space of self-observation and self-construction in the encounter of past and present is supported by Auster's narrative choices. The interplay of distance and intimacy is thereby embedded in a complex process of dialogism, of critical self-reflection on the part of both narratees, as well as the temporal approximation of past events in the present and the recollection of memories and experiences. By establishing a dialogue between narrator and narratee, between narrator and reader, Auster conducts a cleverly constructed autobiographical experiment which introduces a relational take on self-narration and the involvement of the reader. The unusual use of the second person and the innovative deconstruction of the standard communicative situation clearly ties in with the contemporary tendency to renegotiate the limits and possibilities of the genre of autobiographical writing.